

Buffalo Soldiers

"Buffalo Soldiers" was the name given to African-American cavalrymen by their native-American antagonists during the INDIAN WARS in the post-Civil War American West. The first men to serve in all-black army units did so in the Union Army, during the Civil War. The initial all-black regiment, the 54th Massachusetts, trained by its white commander, Col. Robert G. Shaw, suffered heavy casualties in a heroic, though unsuccessful attempt to capture Fort Wagner at Charleston (S.C.) harbor in July 1863. In all, about 209,000 ex-slaves and free blacks served in the Union Army, and more than 68,000 of them died in battle or from wounds or disease.

After the Civil War, Congress authorized two cavalry regiments and four infantry regiments of black troops, who were led by white officers. The 9th and 10th cavalry regiments were formed in 1866 and were used to control "hostile" Indian tribes in the West for the next 25 years. Despite prejudicial treatment by some army officers, as well as open prejudice displayed by many civilians in frontier towns, the black regiments performed effectively. They fought innumerable skirmishes and running battles with Indian warriors in the Great Plains, western Texas, the southwestern desert, and the mountains of Colorado. One company of the 9th regiment fought in the last battle of the Indian Wars, at WOUNDED KNEE, S.Dak., in December 1890. The black troops were proud to be called Buffalo Soldiers; in fact, the regimental crest of the 10th cavalry bore the figure of a buffalo.

Bibliography: Downey, Fairfax D., *The Buffalo Soldiers in the Indian Wars* (1969); Leckie, William H., *The Buffalo Soldiers* (1967; repr. 1975).



Some 179,000 former slaves, among them Sgt. F. L. Baldwin, joined the Union Army during the Civil War.